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ABSTRACT

A clue to the relationship of literature to adolescent development may lie in an understanding of the adolescent's evolving moral conscience. As the adolescent matures in terms of moral thinking, the meaning of particular literary experiences may shift dramatically. According to the theory developed by Kohlberg at Harvard University, individuals in a number of different societies move sequentially through each of six moral stages. At each stage, particular literary issues are especially salient. Adolescents can be expected to move through the literature of social expectation (related to conventional moral thought), the literature of social revolt (related to the transition between conventional and post-conventional moral thought), and the literature of affirmation (related to post-conventional moral thought). If libraries can encourage meaningful personal searches among young people, they can play a vital role in the process of moral development. (Author/PF)

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MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE LITERARY INTERESTS OF ADOLESCENT READERS

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OF ADOLESCENT READERS

INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE AND ADOLESCENCE

In an age of conflict and change, the process of identity search becomes increasingly difficult for many adolescents. The adolescent is told to find meaningful values in a world without order and direction. He is asked to define for himself moral truth in a world which can define none for itself. He is told to find a fulfilling role in a world increasingly impossible to enter.

In this process of identity search, books may play a vital role. Through literature the adolescent is able to anticipate future life dilemmas he will face: the conflicts of love, work, morality and meaning. As well, he is given an historical and philosophical framework with which to analyze his world.

Until recently, there has been little investigation of the precise role played by literature in adolescent growth (Swanger, 1971). This paper offers that a clue to the relationship of literature to adolescent development may lie in an understanding of the adolescent's evolving moral conscience. We will suggest that as the adolescent matures in terms of moral thinking, the meaning of particular literary experiences may shift dramatically. Though understanding changes in adolescent moral thinking we may be able to better understand how literature stimulates though at different developmental stages.

KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL JUDGMENT

Our approach requires an explanation of Kohlberg's theory of moral judgment. The theory was developed at Harvard University (Kohlberg, 1967) by Kohlberg and his associates: It argues that there is an invariant sequence in moral judgment. Longitudinal studies indicate that individuals in a number of different societies move sequentially through each of six moral stages. Moral development occurs through age twenty-five, however, individuals progress at different rates and some people become fixated at primative stages of moral thought.

The six stages are divided into three levels: the preconventional (Stage 1 and 2), the conventional (Stages 3 and 4), and the post-conventional or principled (Stages 5 and 6) as follows:

Table 1

Classification of Moral Judgment Into Levels and Stages of Development

Levels	Stages of Development
I Pre-Conventional Level	Stage 1: Obedience and punishment orientation.
	Stage 2: Naively egoistic orientation.
II Conventional Level	Stage 3: Good-boy orientation.
	Stage 4: Authority and social-order maintaining orientation.
III Post-Conventional Level	Stage 5: Contractual legalistic orientation.
	Stage 6: Conscience or principle orientation.

The preconventional mode of moral problem-solving is typically associated with pre-adolescent children and morally fixated adults. At Stage 1 there is an orientation toward punishment and obedience, toward superior power. The physical consequences of human action determine right and wrong regardless of their human meaning. Stage 2 assumes that right action becomes that which satisfies one's own needs. Human relationships are viewed in terms of the market place: "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

The conventional level becomes dominant in late pre-adolescence. At Stage 3 we have what we call the good boy/good girl orientation. Good behavior is what helps others and is approved by them. One gains approval by being "nice" or exhibiting behavior which will be approved by others. At Stage 4 there is a shift toward fixed definitions of social duty and concern with firm social rules and a respect for formal authority.

The post-conventional (or principled) level, first appears in adolescence: Stage 5 is a legalistic contract orientation, generally with utilitarian overtones. Laws which are not constitutional, violate human rights or are not in the general interest are judged to be invalid at Stage 5.

At Stage 6 Kohlberg postulates there is a basis for rational agreement to moral principles. There are universal principles of justice of ideal reciprocity, the equality of human rights and the respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.

Adolescence is a time of marked growth in moral judgment. Typically during early adolescence (ages 12-14), most youngsters are a mix of stage two (instrumental-hedonistic) and stage three (conformist) orientations. In response to a dilemma about whether it is right for a man to steal a drug to save a dying wife, one fourteen year old responded:

It depends if he loves her or not. Most husbands would love their wives and would do it so that everyone would say they really loved her, but some people might not love their wives that much. (Stage 2(3)

In middle adolescence (15-17) most youngsters adopt a social maintenence position. In response to the same dilemma, a high school senior offered:

He should do it. Society says you must protect your family. The law would probably agree. The judge would say it was his duty to help her because it was his wife. (Stage 4)

In late adolescence we often see a marked shift in moral thinking. The adolescent becomes aware that social values are relative to particular societies. This perception of moral relativism is oftimes accompanied by a moral nihilism in which almost any belief in permanent values are disavowed. In response to our dilemma about the dying wife, one college sophmore responded:

It depends on his society. If I were a Dinka (a tribe in Africa) I might not because I would believe cows were more important than people, but in Capitalist American, believing a bunch of romantic bull, I'd probably do it, if I felt like it. (Stage 4½)

In early adulthood we see many young people moving towards the post-conventional level in which values are defined which are held as ultimately valid. This principled thinking is achieved by roughly 20% of middle class college youth. For example, a young social worker responded:

It is his responsibility to steal it. Any person should steal it for someone in need if he can do it. A person is always more valuable than property. (Stage 5)

MORAL MATURITY AND LITERATURE

At each stage of development, we might speculate that particular literary issues are especially salient. While clearly great literature has an input upon almost any age or developmental level (for example, Crime and Punishment, (Dostoyevski) can be read at age thirteen as a mystery story and at age twenty, as a complex study of human morals), it may still be argued that the moral focus

of a particular work is optimally "targeted" to particular moral concerns.

Thus, Enemy of the People (Ibsen) deals with the conflict between the norms of a community and the moral principles of an individual political man. Where the play can be viewed at any age as a great political melodrama, the issue of group norms vs. individual moral principles only becomes a salient moral problem after stage four, when the adolescent is logically able to differentiate moral right from social law. Similarly, the issue of moral responsibility, as distinct from social contact implicit in such works at The Plague (Camus) or Moby Dick (Melville) may only be accessible after stage five.

In order to explore this hypothesis of the relationship between literature and moral reasoning, let us explore three types of literature each related to a particular moral stage. These are:

The Literature of Social Expectation (related to conventional moral thought)

The Literature of Social Revolt (related to the transition between conventional and post-conventional moral thought)

The Literature of Affirmation (related to post-conventional moral thought)

THE LITERATURE OF SOCIAL EXPECTATION

One of the key developmental tasks of early adolescence involves the adolescent's anticipating and accepting the legitimate expectations of his world. This is the core of Kohlberg's third and fourth stages (the Conventional Level). In any historical era the content of conventional moral thinking may differ. The Amish adolescent may be socialized into a highly prescriptive regulated set or norms and role expectations. For the suburban youth, the norms will be more humanistic and open-ended. Still in each milliu the adolescent grapples with a key developmental question: What does this society expect of me?

Much of the literature popular in early adolescence deals with this theme. Biographies are especially rich in information on the appropriate social expectations of society. One youngster may be drawn to a biography about Martin Luther King; for another it will be the narrative of Joe Namath's career; for another a novel about Susan B. Anthony might be significant. Usually, novels popular through age thirteen deal with themes which are moralistic in the sense that characters are defined as either good, bad, heroic or cowardly in a given society. Historically based fiction has a similar impact in its detail about a tradition and its expectations.

When the Literature of Social Expectations is critical of society, it does so in such a way that the society is judged from a conventional set of moral standards. For example, a book on slavery, popular among eighth graders deals with the wrongness of slavery in terms of stage three societally defined interpersonal standards, rather than some more abstract social principle:

> Slavery in America was not right because many slaves were treated badly. People today would not tolerate slavery because we today feel that it's wrong to treat people cruelly and sell their children to others.

This Literature of Social Expectations fits with the conventional level of moral reasoning (stages three and four). The literature accepts a moral tradition, instead of questioning one. Good literature at this level provides a coherent moral universe with the adolescent (can order his world). This stable moral world provides a developmental platform from which the adolescent can differentiate his society's values from those of other groups. Where his moral ideology may seem "conformist" or "corny", it is a necessary step toward developing a firm value base.

THE LITERATURE OF SOCIAL REVOLT

Typically in late adolescence many youngsters begin to actively question

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the moral order of their society. In any historical era this may take a unique form. Youth will become Freedom Riders, Skinheads, LSD "freaks," or Klansmen. They will join S.N.C.C. (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Y.A.F. (Young Americans for Freedom), the Hare Krishna, or the Communist Party. They will follow people as diverse as Martin Luther King, Ghandi, and "the fifteen year old perfect master." The key to any such commitment is Youth's critique of society as it stands. The youth rejects the conventional moral order and seeks to find his own.

Needless to say, this questioning is disburbing to many adults, including librarians. They fail to see that such a rejection of conventional societal truth is a critical step in the adolescent's defining for himself an autonomous value base. Of course, some youth will become fixated in one rigid ideology or another (Hitler and Abbie Hoffman may be good examples of permanent nihilistic fixation). For most, however, the beginning of social doubt and questioning is a necessary developmental step towards finding a set of autonomously chosen, universal moral principles.

The surfacing of doubt requires a new literature. A key to this type of literature is the rejection of social conventions. The Catcher in the Rye (Sallinger) is a good example of such critique. As the protagonist, Holden Caulfield sees his world, its is a world of hypocracy and sham. Adults lie to adolescents and each other. Nobody really believes in any of society's expectations and roles. Success is mere conformity. Love is a bourgeois excuse to become respectably "settled."

The adolescent reading Catcher in the Rye strongly identifies with Holden Caulfied's rebellion .Most adolescents by age sixteen have begun to have strong doubts about the perceived moral propriety of their parents and teachers. Their

initial questioning is no doubt stimulated by the vivid images in the Catcher in the Rye or similar picaresque novels. For example, one suburban high school student noted:

> The character in the novel Catcher in the Rye showed me how fucked up things are in society. It shows that the morality of people is really old-fashioned and out of date. It really gets you thinking about what SOCIETY is like...

The Literature of Revolt must be associated with the transition from conventional (stages three and four) and principled (stages five and six) moral thinking . In order to move to principled thinking, the adolescent must actively criticize his society's moral conventions. While such a step often threatens adults, it is clearly often a necessary one towards the development of a post-conventional moral ideology.

THE LITERATURE OF AFFIRMATION

In The Rebel, Albert Camus writes:

> Who is the Rebel? A man who says no, but by saying no does not imply a renunciation ... To say yes, by saying no... Beyond revolt comes affirmation ....

As in Camus' statement of moral rebellion, Kohlberg argues that beyond a rejection of social morality comes an affirmation of universal principles. Much literature involves a quest for universal moral and metaphysical meaning. This literature becomes increasingly important in early adulthood.

Much of the greatest literature deals with this question of ultimate human values. In the realm of ethics, Buber, Camus, Orwell, Dostoyevski, Melville and others all attempt to pose some ethical principles which provide moral limits to human conduct. Such writers as Hesse, Neitsche, Castenada and De Chardin powerfully explore the question of the metaphysical meanings underlying daily experience. Much poetry moves towards finding an ultimate standard of beauty and truth.

In each of these works there is a postulation of some kind of ultimate human meaning or value. Each moves towards some moral, metaphysical or aesthetic truth which is seen as non-relativistic and ultimate. Each offers that there are some values which are worth affirming, something positive to live for.

The final stage is psychologically quite distinct from both an early adolescent conformity as it is from the relativism and nihilism of the early college years. The search for transcendent values through literature offers a bridge to a full adulthood where in Erik Erikson's terms the young adult seeks to make meaningful and self-determined choices in the realms of love, work and meaning.

This movement towards a mature adulthood has special meaning in a world of cultural change and conflicting value systems. Only adults who have reflected upon and developed a clear set of inner values can hope to cope with the flux of the last quarter of the twentieth century. In this search for values, books and libraries have a unique task. If libraries can encourage meaningful personal searches among young people, they can play a vital role in the process of moral development. To do this, they must create a climate of openness towards the exploring adolescent and gear their offerings to the developmental concerns and interests of the emerging adolescent.

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